Chapter **05**

The Creaturely Life of Entropy: Producing Meaning in the Service of Art or Science

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Schoonraad's statement is ambiguous. He may be saying that Battiss imaginatively filled in parts of the paintings that were actually missing in the original. However, Schoonraad could also have meant that those parts that were 'missing' were simply not immediately apparent and could become visible when the light changed or the viewer shifted their perspective. In my experience, the paintings can be visually unstable, particularly the faded or incomplete ones, with their appearance changing throughout the day and depending on the weather conditions (De Harde 2022:95).

Introduction

Much art centres on capturing otherwise fleeting moments. Photography holds this function in a way that is often equated with a kind of death (Sey 2015:104), so close does it come to reducing the real, lively experience of time (and its perpetual loss), freezing forever its subject as a pure condition of material substance against light.

But a material capture is also produced in hand-painted work, not as a product of instantaneity, but through processes of enactment. A certain event is mimetically reproduced through strange fragmentations and unexpected convergences of the original event's associative or metaphoric powers—an often confusing or surprising *re-enactment,* because what is realised through the process is not a new idea so much as a focusing on what has always been internal to or hidden in the original event. In Laura de Harde's practice, the interminable entropy associated with history is reproduced in an allegory of missed encounters with her subjects and their subjectivities—who remain in the archives.

In this reproduction of anonymous photographic portraits, light and solid matter of surface—a record of first causes—is scrambled. The loose-leaf papers are shared with her mother (a celebrated master quilter), who works on the paper with her Bernina 770 QE sewing machine. The thread is driven through the surface in circular whirls of curlicues, often found as framing elements of portrait miniatures. In a curious collapse of the passe-partout, the Bernina is piloted straight over the picture plane as if to trap the portraits within the delicate whorls, being disfigured and sometimes structured by them.

De Harde engages in staining acts of play between the absorbency of the paper and thread and the fluidity of the ink medium. Some resemblance to her subject (the old photograph portrait) is loosely gestured outwards and drawn in with blue-grey ink washes. The washes are also drawn to an edge which sharply circumscribes a fine outline or detail. The artist works minimally with bleach on the ink stains which have the curious effect of fading the ink but leaving yellow-brown traces that are suggestive of old bruises and wounds. The works are then left to dry, but in some cases, the water of the face stains has dissolved or imprinted the paper so that the portraits are skeletally reduced to her mother's stitching, forming web-like structures of lace, or decay.

The fragmentary sheathes hold a fragile indeterminacy and organic cross-pollination of forms that register as beautiful and ephemeral: a 'collection' worth keeping. But these anonymous portraits are not restored to subjectivity by the process of abrading surface and reducing form, of supplementary details and imposed decay. It is less that the photographs are reproduced in painting than a moment of breakdown is repeatedly enacted: the process of entropic dissolution into obsolescence, something that the archives themselves are undergoing
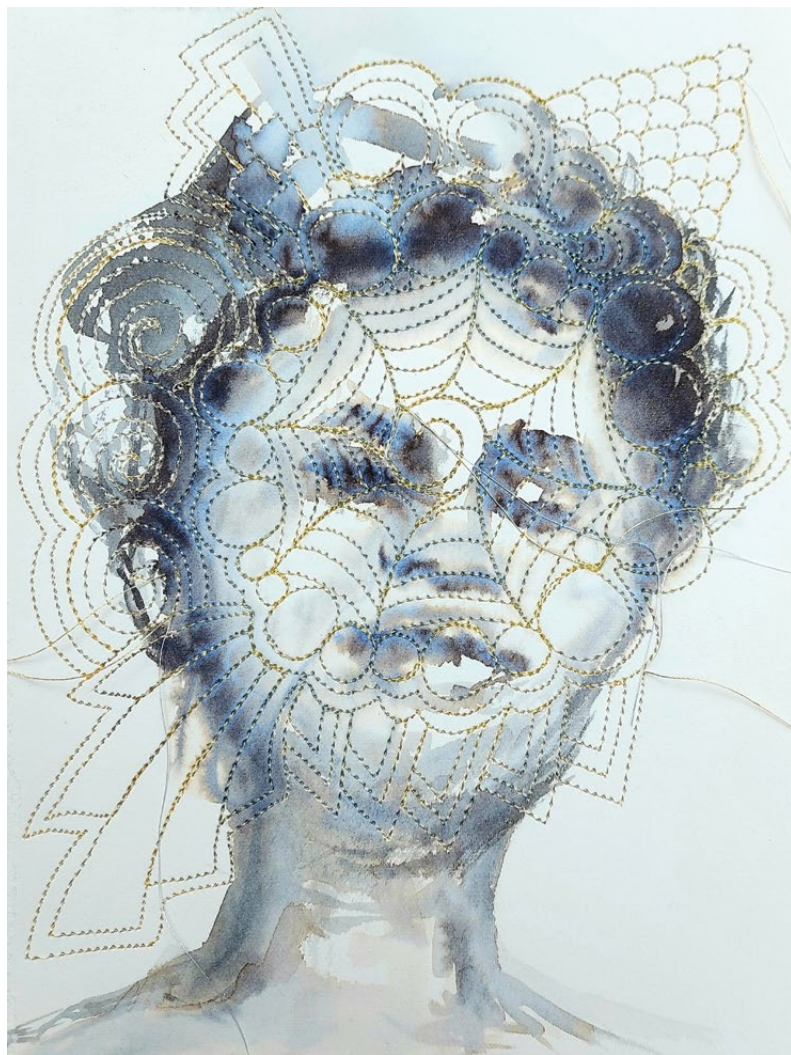
Figure 5.1.
Pride by Laura de Harde, 15 x 20 cm, 2020, ink and thread on Fabriano paper.
Courtesy of the artist.

over time, is reproduced. A process and a posture of disintegration and of loss is mimetically captured and reanimated as a function of its capture. These pieces exemplify Theodor Adorno's conception of art's role in post-war society:

> art's frozen mimetic snapshots of reality take on its sclerotic features, while yearning for something more flexible, a something which glimmers elusively in the childlike possibility of an open relationship between artworks and those who receive them (Connell 1998:68).

That tension between a sclerotic entropy and yearning for *something* claimed as a quality of fragile beauty in these works contains the germ of 'creaturely life' I want to explore as a feature of De Harde's scholarship in relationship to art and the archives and which connects in its 'spectral materiality' to certain art forms as 'an archive of creaturely life' (Santner 2006:xiii). Developed by theorist Eric Santner (2006), this extra-aesthetic domain describes the affective force of bearing witness to the remnants of violence that characterises much of Western history and tales of scientific progress. Drawing from Walter Benjamin (1928), Santner construes creaturely life as an immanent perceptual quality of reflecting on the past, but which is also tainted by a strange sense of enjoyment at this encounter with the ruins of symbolic life: with the revelation of a particular temporality of truth in its lived materiality, now lost.

In this essay, I view the artistic process of De Harde's paintings as a mimetic enactment of entropy. In material processes exemplifying the entropic principle of simplification and disorder, De Harde illuminates or brings this haunting, spectral quality of creaturely life into tangible form. With reference to the notion of entropy in science discourses, I reflect on an eerie psychological space of jouissance and loss in knowledge-making practices. The observing position being so key to the perception of entropy—the experience of joy or trauma—I contend that the ethical dimension of witnessing and making meaning of the past in our time is all-important to a project of restoration. I argue that it is precisely in the dream-wish for a more wholesome state of being, for a fuller understanding and more complete knowledge, that a form of uncertainty is introduced, which has devastating effects on humankind and the environment. This writing forms the beginning of

an appeal to science to reflect on the creaturely life that generates and maintains its burgeoning grip on the material world. Mirroring the natural world in its speechless unpredictability, this remnant of the drive to knowledge, the will to power, is perceptible at the level of a thoroughly human condition.

The obscurity of origins

A qualitative element of all worthwhile research maintains an element of lasting mystery. It is known for its effects on the researcher; it is a mainspring of much discovery. It *is* the sense of discovery, but it also concerns the seeming limitless anxiety with which the discovery is pursued. *It* holds curiosity and enigma, but remaining out of view, is also crashing in its disappointment. It is a remainder of the content under investigation (or experimentation) that escapes representation. Difficult to describe, it is called simply the remainder, or 'thing', or the noumenon.[1] It remains unclear whether that unknowable element is a property of the object perceived or purely subjective, remaining just out of grasp to the subject of cognition or an internal quality of her own imaginative limits—or desire.

My interest in this remnant is framed here as an extra-aesthetic domain of the 'creaturely'. The term frames desire in proximity to the natural world of creatures because it lacks representation—the enigmatic particle that refuses discursive language—yet, 'it' gazes back. As Eric Santner (2006:52) states, it is a distinguishing feature of a fundamentally human 'thingness' precisely because it is felt in relation to the loss of symbolic meaning that historical artefacts and archives present: all the 'past lives and lost possibilities' that the things of the past can affectively trigger. Santner (2006:16) draws in the main from Walter Benjamin's melancholic positioning of the creaturely against a 'backdrop of breakdown and reification': but what is lost is not the natural world as such, but the symbolic meaning humans have invested the world with. In particular, the loss of symbolic life is an effect of history's decay and human sovereignty's destructive potential. It is visibly tangible in witnessing 'cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning' such as architectural ruins or relics and artefacts that have become obsolete—an entropic condition, the repetition of which is 'always connected to violence' (Benjamin in Santner 2006:17).

Over the course of his prestigious 2021 Boyle Lecture at the International Society of Science and Religion, acclaimed scientist and professor of natural philosophy Tom McLeish invokes the thermodynamic principle of entropy as exemplary of science while noting how entropy is much more relative and less exacting than the objectivity, lucidity and rigour held up as science's ideal. According to McLeish, observing entropy reveals the imminent potential for mores of scientific objectivity to acknowledge and even harness a close relationship to subjective conditions of imagination and memory. As with the experience of viewing Monet's paintings, he states, the definition of entropy 'corresponds exactly' to the 'careful choice' of proximity or distance the observer has to her subject matter. Thus, whereas entropy is most often described as 'an intrinsic measure of disorder', it is

> [...] better thought of as a measure of our deliberate ignorance in contemplating the system: Of how many detailed components we choose to blur together in our mental and mathematical representations of nature [...] The glorious paradox here is that by negotiating an entropic relationship with the world—by formally choosing to know *less* about its detail in this way, we can arrange to understand *more* (McLeish 2021).

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A similar argument is addressed in intensive detail throughout De Harde's scholarship on the archives of rock art, especially hand-painted reproductions of rock art, as they may form an epistemological contribution to the field of rock art studies. For all the quiet backroom research and sweaty excursions to rock faces De Harde has undertaken, she ventures an argument with radical implications: that we can develop our engagement with rock art—and potentially what the art was originally meant to signify or do—through formally analysing and contextualising (through properties of line, colour, and composition) the history of San art *reproductions* (De Harde 2022:76; Weintroub & De Harde 2021:85).[2]

With McLeish's reframing, we may characterise De Harde's research as centred on the 'entropic relationship' of creative copies with their originals: by actively choosing not to focus on the core body of scholarship around rock art (the art's original function and signification), work is produced to understand more of the ever-shifting terrain of visuality and knowledge production—ultimately, our scholarly, *scientific* interest in the interpretation of visual data depends on it. The research is reflective in this way. Against an instrumental unpacking of rock art as a historical

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[1] I have argued previously that this resistant element is linked to notions of experiencing trauma because both trauma and remainders resist symbolisation, and indeed the present text returns to the problem of identification (Webster 2017). [2] Besides the obvious empirical reasons—many of the originals have suffered the ravages of touch, time and neglect—De Harde analyses rock art copies not for a clearer sense of narrative content that may subtend the re-articulation of these finely painted figures and forms, but for how copying processes are 'creative practices' in themselves. Through time, the aesthetic choices of copyists have come to structure some of the 'hidden' or 'complex ways' in which visual knowledge has developed in this field (De Harde 2022:76; Weintroub & De Harde 2021:87).

record, De Harde's argument intentionally steers readers towards 'the uncertainty and nuance that remains at the heart of scholarly research and knowledge-making' (Weintroub & De Harde 2021:84).

Negotiating entropy opens productive space because eliding certain information in favour of something else intangible and uncertain shines not only on the ethical prerogatives of 'careful choice' as espoused by McLeish but also on the creaturely life of creative acts in science: the very notion of the *imagination* and its role for research. The term, as invoked in McLeish's lecture (2021), is put to theological work drawing the possibility of continuity with Medieval science as a 'rung ... in the healing relationship to nature'—a concept he goes on to draw out, holding original proximity with the Christian doctrine of divine inspiration. Imagination maintains some of this enigmatic dearth of connotation in more recent treatments of science philosophy, McLeish states, citing Karl Popper acknowledging that 'there is no scientific method for generating those scientific hypotheses that he spent the next 500 pages on in the first place' (McLeish 2021).

De Harde engages the question by raising the quite astonishing detail that the reproductions made by Walter Battiss, a well-known twentieth century South African artist and recognised researcher of rock art, cannot, most often, be linked to the originals at all.

> This difficulty in matching original with copy reinforces my contention that Battiss sometimes deviated deliberately from the original rock art, even though his process involved elements of close observation and 'accurate' copying. (De Harde 2022:92)

With critical distance, De Harde (2022:95) reviews arguments about Battiss's artist sensibility presenting 'uncanny' examples of intuition and traces the 'imaginative' scope Battiss found in San approaches to perspective. She also describes his compulsive return to rock faces in terms of 'enchantment' (2022:85), a concept of social anthropologist Alfred Gell which De Harde and Wintjes (2020:66) deploy in another text towards considering the technological processes of reproduction as a 'strategy creat[ing] a degree of remove in relation to the enchanting original; it opens the dynamic of enchantment itself up for investigation'.

The uncertainty asserted as internal and vital to the study of reproductions also holds an ethical function in diminishing the grip of modern Western meaning-making on experiences of an 'other', particularly one who is lost to history. Uncertainty is deployed as a form of critique in Catherine Zaayman's (2014) scholarship on the figure of Krotoa, where there is primarily evidence of Krotoa's life in the archives as absent. We know through Van Riebeeck's diaries that Krotoa was a Khoi woman indentured as a child servant by the 1600s Dutch settlers in the Cape and who came to hold something of an interstitial role in Dutch and Khoi relations. But while records of Krotoa are scant, myths, theories, and creative imaginings of Krotoa's life abound (Zaayman 2014:303). After marrying a white settler and bearing mixed-race children, Krotoa was ultimately eschewed from Dutch colonial society while estranging from her original kin (Zaayman 2014:307). This 'colonial identity' is at once the basis of myth-making, which construes Krotoa as 'the first true South African' (2014:310). Also, it designates her as a sign of all those Khoisan who are missing or 'lost' in the archives: a 'pressure' exerted on this lonely figure to represent 'the loss of history' itself (2014:303). Zaayman holds that while imaginative transculturation of narratives for Krotoa are often a significant attempt to grapple with postcolonial identity and heritage within the ashes of apartheid, the symbolic violence contained with that pressure—to represent so much trauma—is also implied.

The proclivity for trauma to make its place in the gaps of uncertainty and missed encounters has a long history, particularly in the scrupulous recording and mapping of colonial settlers in the Cape. David Chidester (1996:2) draws from archived accounts of European encounters with Khoisan, whose language was so 'other' from the flattened vowels of European speech that 'the problem of intercultural communication was initially posed as an extraordinary situation in which human language was totally absent'. This perception progressed to the study of the gesture and movement of Khoisan bodies, Chidester writes, resulting in a fixation with body parts and 'mutilation' of subjects in the name of scientific inquiry, as well as other brutal acts of extermination accorded those who have been turned into objects.

The truth of this violence is approached in a much more recent account of forensic scrutiny and the black body by the late artist, theorist and art critic Colin Richards (1954–2012). Here truth is cast as a missed encounter with his own deep trauma and sense of complicity in apartheid. This moving and sensitive essay details the artistic complex of conveying memory as truthful to and authentic of the trauma he bore witness to and felt instrumentalised by, first as a young conscript

on the Angolan border and later, as a science illustrator working in the pathology labs of Wits Medical School (1999:9, 14). In the essay, Richards discloses his unwitting participation in Steve Biko's post-mortem when asked to provide forensic labels and indicators on carelessly taken photographs of a bruised and wounded body. As he realised later, this grisly record was material for the inquest into Biko's murder (Richards 1999:10). Viewed in association with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (which was taking place while he began producing the work under discussion), Richards's project grapples with the tensions and breakdowns of memory and meaning that characterise acts of witnessing and confession:

> In the TRC's often painful public choreography of disclosure, we find the serpentine presence of what Sarah Nuttall (1998) calls the 'messy activity of memory'. We find, through rough images drawn from ruined and ruinous recollection, unimaginable truths and unspeakable lies taking the same stand (1999:2).

Mirroring these tensions between truth and lies, Richards frames his research as inhabiting an uncertain space where the glimmers of psychic exposure to the real—a revisiting of trauma that recalling these events prompts—also tend to remain 'veiled' to total recall. His doubts are doubly veiled by his misgivings for art to 'rescue' truth from the 'deep duplicities of memory' (1999:4). In Richards's meditations, both art and memory are essentially reproductions or copies of the original event. Between art and memory, 'making sense of the past' is understood as a 'radical simplification' or condition of entropy, which 'demands a selecting, ordering, and simplifying, a construction of coherent narrative whose logic works to draw the life story towards the fable' (Samuel & Thompson 1990, as cited by Richards 1999:3).

As Richards describes it, the 'provisional rescue' which representation and narrative can perform are just as quickly replaced by doubts and uncertainty towards his real and imagined 'fabrication' of meaning that his art practice performs. Santner similarly describes this domain of psychological tension as the 'signifying stress' of creaturely life: the 'never-ceasing work of symbolisation and failure at symbolisation, translation, and failure at translation' (2006:33).

De Harde raises the vicissitudes of signifying stress in her reflections on Walter Battiss's practice as a copyist and as an original

Figure 5.2.
Almost White by Colin Richards, artwork (right panel of triptych, *Almost Non-White, White Headstone, Almost White*), 28 x 21 cm, 1999, pen and ink on paper. Courtesy of the Sasol Art Collection.
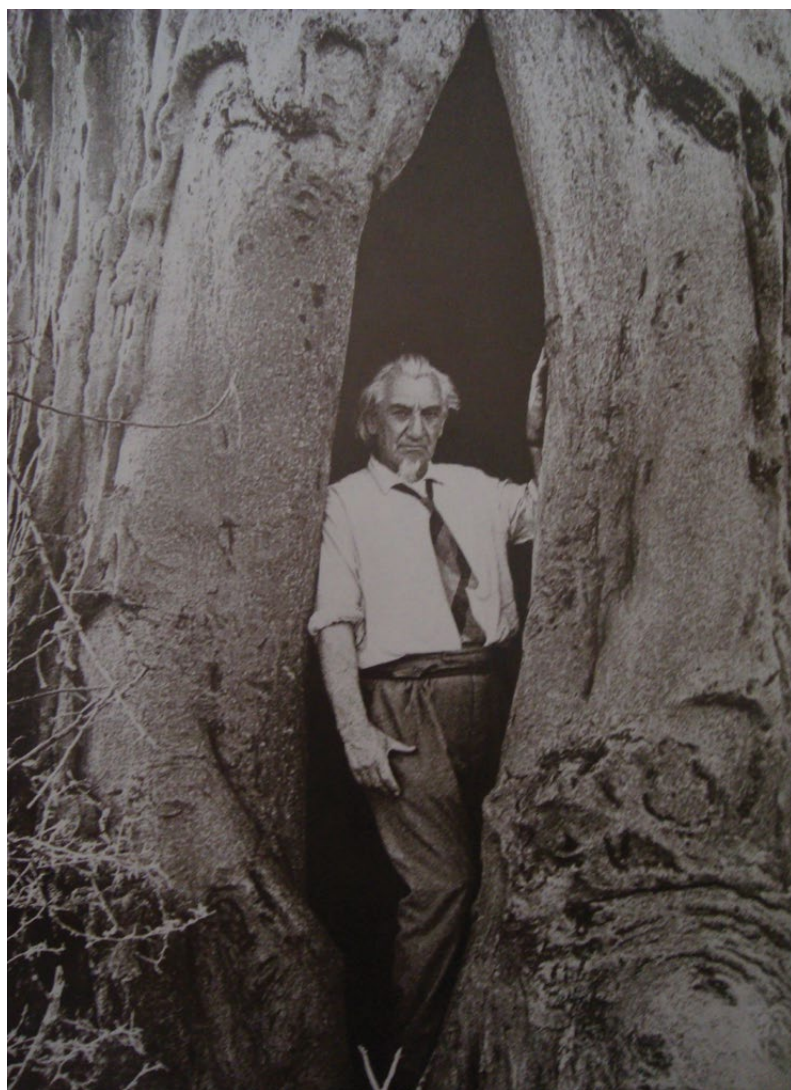
Figure 5.3.
Untitled portrait, Walter Battiss in a baobab, date unknown, from his book *Limpopo* (1965), published by Van Schaik, Pretoria. Courtesy of the Walter Battiss Museum.

artist, a 'dichotomy of identity' which apparently 'plagued' him in his early years: 'Was he Battiss, the student of prehistoric art, or was he Battiss, the artist?' (Schoonraad in De Harde 2022:97). In both roles, Battiss demonstrated an obsessive drive that resulted in a prolific output of creative work, neither of which, as noted, is strictly referential to a particular source or subject matter but which was illuminated by originality which remains singular and unique even within the contemporary global milieu of artists young and old. In as much as the form of life and character evoked by San rock art was a source of inspiration, it is equally likely that the inherent 'failure to translate' San art inhabited the original resolve to manifest new worlds of colour and meaning so adjacent but different to the familiar scenes of the everyday. More recently, as De Harde (2022:97) points out, the Wits Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) restored a significant number of Battiss's reproductions for a 2016 exhibition, the same year in which collector and philanthropist Jack Ginsberg, together with curator Warren Siebrits, produced a separate exhibition at the Wits Art Museum (WAM) entitled *I Invented Myself*.

This access to creaturely life is not what De Harde's own dichotomous working process reveals. Her repetitive return to painting the old portraits within the archives, many of which in South Africa and Zimbabwe are in various stages of crumbling neglect, may be interpreted as an act of sublimation: a decompression of the signifying stress her scholarly research meaningfully pursues. The pieces act for and re-enact within the strange temporality of reproducing the archives. Indeed, the retrieval of the past for the recognition of its loss creates this effect on time. But this reproduction of countless reproductive acts, of lives lost to obscurity, is inscribed in these works, literally and conceptually, as a maternal emblem of care. A creaturely form of caring this may be, because the integrity of subjectivity is in no way restored to these faces. Rather, a tenderness towards the human condition of remains unfolds.

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